



SUCCESS STORY

Supporting Women in Traditional Communities

USAID supports the growth of a vibrant, politically active civil society across Iraq.



ICSP trainer Zeinab explains the role of women in the constitution.

ICSP must overcome numerous obstacles as it works to develop capable women leaders and build a network of civil society organizations that will continue to advocate for the rights of women. ICSP is making significant progress on all fronts, including dismantling age-old perceptions about women's role in society.

Through training, forums, workshops, and awareness-raising activities, ICSP is succeeding case by case and village by village.

When Zeinab, a trainer from USAID's Iraq Civil Society and Independent Media Program (ICSP), arrived at the small village in the weeks before the constitutional referendum, she was shocked by the audience that assembled for her two-day workshop. Attending her training, *Women's Rights in the New Constitution*, were two dozen men, but not a single woman. The sheikh who helped arrange the training offered an explanation: In some villages women attend these sorts of events. But this village is more traditional, he explained, and women are expected to remain at home.

Located on the outskirts of Karbala, the village has just over a thousand inhabitants. Agriculture forms the basis of the economy, and most of the land is used for date farming. Zeinab targeted this particular village as part of an effort to reach as many women as possible, especially in remote areas.

Though she was disappointed, Zeinab knew that pleading with the sheikh to change his mind would be futile. She decided to proceed with her training and began by outlining the course and defining the terms that she would be using. The men listened attentively as she continued through the lesson plan. After an hour, she gently posed a question, **"Would it be all right if the men allowed their wives to attend the workshop?"** The men agreed. There was plenty of space on the carpet, so the women could sit separately and still participate.

Zeinab asked that the group take a break and waited for the women to arrive. When the workshop resumed, there were more than 20 women. The following day, among the 45 participants, the women outnumbered the men.

The training was a unique experience for these women who work as housewives and mothers. They were excited by the material that Zeinab presented. Using a course from the ICSP-designed Women's Advocacy curriculum, Zeinab covered the international women's agreements and how these related to the articles on women's rights in the new constitution (especially the personal status law). Zeinab discussed the role that women's advocacy groups could play in changing the position of women in Iraq and how the constitution supported this changing role. After the lecture, two of the women asked if they too could work to advance the rights of women. Zeinab connected the women to an ICSP-partner civil society organization. The two women are now members.